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SUBJECT: IN LAST PLACE AND FALLING: THE PROBLEM OF EDUCATION IN NIGER

SUMMARY

¶1. Niger's education system ranks among the worst in the world. It suffers from a crumbling infrastructure, a lack of resources and a teacher corps that is under-trained and demoralized. Niger's woes are compounded by a population growth rate of 3.4%, one of the highest in the world. Corruption and mismanagement are serious problems, although the government has begun to address them. These factors auger a bleak future for Nigerien youth in a country where two-thirds of the population is younger than 25 years of age, the literacy rates is 29% and gross primary enrollments are 52% for boys and 37% for girls. The poor state of Niger's education system was the key factor securing its place at the bottom of the UNDP Human Development Index.

¶2. This cable is the first in a series and will examine the current state of Niger's education system and the challenges the GON faces in formulating and implementing meaningful reform. Other cables will identify key public, private and international educational institutions in Niger and address problems of gender disparity in enrollments, the emerging role of private and Islamic schools in Nigerien society, and the financial, linguistic, curricular, and human resource challenges, which continue to plague the education system.

Education Policy In Niger: An Overview

¶3. The Nigerien system of education is a national system run by three separate ministries. Preschool, primary and literacy development are the responsibility of the Ministry of Basic Education and Literacy (MEBA). Secondary education and higher education fall under the Ministry of Secondary & Higher Education, Research and Technology (MESSRT). The Ministry of Professional Training and Employment of Youth (FPTEJ) oversees vocational training.

¶4. The National Board of Education meets once a year in Niamey. In addition, each of Niger's eight regions has its own board, which ostensibly develops and coordinates regional education policy. In reality, there is little meaningful planning or coordination at the national level and the regional boards have no practical effect on education policy, resource allocation or decision-making.

¶5. In 1998, the GON passed La Loi D'Orientation du Systeme Educatif du Niger (LOSEN) which identified the most pressing needs of Nigerien students and established a set of objectives to improve the

education system. Eight years later, LOSEN has yet to be fully implemented.

The Nigerien Education System

16. The educational system in Niger is organized as follows:

--Preschool (Jardin d'Enfants) begins at age four or five and lasts for two academic years. Enrollment in preschool is not universal and the majority of preschools are private, expensive and located in urban centers. The cost of public preschool runs FCFA 6,000 to 10,000 (\$12-20) per year with private schools costing approximately FCFA 50,000 (\$100) a year. This amount is significant when compared with Niger's per capita GNI of \$240.

--Primary school begins at age seven and lasts six years. At the conclusion of their sixth year, students take the national secondary school entrance exam. Only about 40% pass the exam. Those that fail can repeat the academic year, but only once. If they fail a second time, they must drop out or enroll in private school. Public schooling at the primary level is free. Private schools average about FCFA 50,000 (\$100) per year.

--Middle school consists of four academic years with enrollment beginning at about age 12-15, depending on the student's performance in primary school. At the conclusion of their fourth year, students take a national exam called the Brevet d' Etudes du Premier Cycle(BEPC). Student success rates on the exam have averaged 40%, however, last year's pass rate was only 20%. The GON touted this recent drop as a success since it resulted in large part from a campaign to combat corruption in national testing, where students'

NIAMEY 00000158 002 OF 003

families bribe teachers, or teachers extort their students to gain a passing grade.

Students who fail may repeat the year if they have not repeated a class in the same cycle previously. If they are ineligible to repeat, they are expelled. Parents who can afford to do so send their children to private schools to finish their secondary education. The cost of public secondary education is free with tuition at private institutions averaging FCFA 100,000 (\$200) per year.

--High School (Lycee) consists of three academic years of study. First year studies follow a common curriculum, but in the second and third years, students are tracked based on their aptitude in mathematics, humanities, languages and science. High schools are generally only located in cities and larger towns, making it difficult for students from rural areas or smaller towns to attend. The GON stopped providing boarding facilities at the lycees in 1983 due to financial constraints and concerns by the Kountche regime that boarding schools were becoming hotbeds for anti-government protest movements.

At the conclusion of the third year students take a national exam called the Bacalaureat de l'Enseignement Secondaire (more commonly known as the "Bac"). Those who pass are eligible to attend university. Those who fail can repeat the year, if they have not already repeated any of the previous classes at this level. If they are ineligible to repeat, they are expelled. Success rates have averaged 30% in the past, however last year only 11% of students passed the exam. Again, this was spun by the GON as the successful implementation of their efforts to eliminate fraud and corruption in national testing.

Regardless of spin, success rates have been very low and remain so. A major factor in poor student performance is the inadequate instruction at the primary school level, where many students administratively pass to the next level while unable to read or write. They are then able to bribe a passing grade on the BEPC and continue on to the lycee.

--Professional and Vocation schools are available for students who

pass the BEPC, but do not wish to go on to lycee. These students take a competitive exam to enter one of the professional schools such as the National School of Public Health (ENSP), Rural Development Institute (IPDR), National School of Public Administration (ENAM), the Aor School of Mining (EMAIR), or one of several public vocational schools.

Tuition at public institutions is free for those who pass the entrance exams. Other students who wish to attend may do so at a cost of FCFA 200,000 (\$400) per year. Private vocational schools cost upwards of FCFA 250,000 (\$500) per year.

The Curriculum

¶17. The primary and secondary school curriculum is developed at the national level by the Institute National de Documentation de Recherche et d'Animation Pedagogique (INDRAP). INDRAP technically falls under MEBA, though it is also responsible for secondary school curriculum development and implementation. INDRAP inspectors and teacher trainers are tasked with ensuring that the national curriculum is instituted and followed. Both public and private schools are required to follow the national curriculum.

¶18. INDRAP has worked to modernize the national curriculum, however a persistent problem remains. French continues to be the medium of instruction from preschool level onward, though many Nigeriens are not fluent French speakers. Some suggest beginning preschool and primary education in local languages and gradually introducing French, however, this is made difficult by the number of ethnic and linguistic groups which comprise modern-day Niger.

¶19. The exception to the French-language standard is Niger's Franco-Arabic schools, which use both languages for instruction. These schools exist at the primary, middle and high-school level. Niger has very few Arabic speakers and enrollments at these institutions are low, with about 8% of students attending Franco-Arabic schools.

Resource Issues

NIAMEY 00000158 003 OF 003

¶10. The root causes of the crisis facing Niger's education system are insufficient and/or crumbling infrastructure, lack of human resources and poor financial management:

--Approximately two-thirds of Niger's population is under age 25 and the population continues to grow at a rate of 3.4% per year. Niger does not currently have enough classroom space for its existing student population and the problem will only intensify as the demographics skew younger.

--Public schools in urban areas are poorly maintained and often lack electricity, blackboards, furniture and basic school supplies. In the rainy season classes at some schools must be cancelled during storms due to leaky roofs. Educational infrastructure in rural areas is often deficient or non-existent.

--In 2004-2005 secondary schools numbered 410 with 3,661 classrooms (which included 724 straw huts). During that period, the number of school-age children set to start secondary studies (13 to 15 years old) was 1,019,014, although only 108,270 or 10.6% were actually enrolled. Until the 1980s, school supplies were provided to students free of charge. Currently that is not the case, and parents are forced to contribute more and more to finance their children's education, even if they attend public schools.

--The growing number of school-age children requires the hiring and training of more teachers. Current GON practice consists of filling this gap with often unqualified teachers called "contractuels" who do not have the same wages or employment guarantees as the civil servant teaching corps. The contractuels are often recent

university graduates with no academic or practical teacher training. This two-tiered system began in 1997 and the contractuels now represent more than 60% of current teachers.

-- In FY2002, external support represented 45% of the government budget, including 80% of its capital budget. The GON remains dependent on funds from international donors to provide basic services, including education. However two recent cases have come to light, where GON officials are accused of embezzling or misappropriating donor funds earmarked for education programs. As a result, the Minister of Basic Education was fired and he, his predecessor and several working level officials in the ministry face prosecution. However, many businessmen involved in sweetheart contracts with MEBA were only required to pay restitution and escaped more serious charges. As a result of these incidents, donors are requesting better accounting and financial management as a condition of future funding.

Conclusion

¶11. The challenges facing Niger's education sector are daunting. While the GON seeks to increase access to education for its school-age population, particularly girls, it does not have the resources, infrastructure, or teachers to adequately educate its existing students. Success in increasing enrollments without additional investment in infrastructure and human resources will only further tax a system near collapse. In addition, increased capacity without corresponding improvement in teacher training and the quality of education will only succeed in moving more students through a dysfunctional system, and will not impart the knowledge and skills necessary for Nigerien students to succeed after graduation.

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